

Records of '65 Involvement Secret in Vain

# No Viet Request for GIs Found

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The Nixon Administration has searched the records in vain for evidence that South Vietnam made any formal request for U.S. combat troops before the first American battalions reached there in March, 1965, officials acknowledged yesterday.

Administration officials spent nearly four months examining, and mulling over, how to answer an inquiry from Sen. J. William Fulbright

(D-Ark.) about that surprising omission from the record of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

"We could not find a specific document" and there was no "formal diplomatic request," for the troops, a State Department official acknowledged yesterday. He minimized its absence, however, on grounds that the record shows "continuing consultation" about sending the U.S. troops that "amounts to a request."

The reason for the delay in answering Fulbright, who is

chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was because "a lot of historical research" was required, the State Department said. Other sources said that during this period the administration agonized over how to make a reply that would not embarrass the U.S. position.

Fulbright eventually received a circuitous reply, which avoided saying flatly that there never was a formal South Vietnamese request for combat troops and tried to gloss over the omission.

The Senator on Sept. 12 put the exchange into the Congressional Record, where it escaped general notice, although Fulbright said at the time:

"It is shocking to realize that Congress was not asked for specific authority for the sending of American soldiers to South Vietnam and, indeed, that the government of South Vietnam itself did not make a written, formal request for these troops."

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Fulbright said yesterday that the incident is another example of the Executive Branch's failure "to deal candidly with the Congress and the public" on Vietnam during the Johnson administration.

On May 12, Fulbright wrote to Secretary of State William P. Rogers, noting that in April, Gen. William C. Westmoreland, in a 347-page report on his years as U.S. commander in South Vietnam, said it was his "judgment" that U.S. forces should be deployed in Vietnam.

Fulbright noted that the Westmoreland report failed to mention any "formal request" from the South Vietnamese government for U.S. intervention with combat troops. He asked Rogers to supply copies of "any such request . . ."

The long-delayed reply was dated Sept. 2, 1969, and signed by H. G. Torbert Jr., acting assistant secretary for congressional relations, but it actually represented a studied administration response. Its key sentences were:

"As the Westmoreland report made clear, the initial decision to deploy United States combat troops in South Vietnam in the spring and summer of 1965 resulted from a continuing analysis of a constantly changing situation, a major factor in which was the deployment to South Vietnam of regular North Vietnamese troops from the end of 1964 onward . . ."

"The continuing analysis to which I have referred, and the series of decisions resulting from it, were made in close and constant consultation with the government of Vietnam."

"The process of analyzing the situation by the two governments, and the consultation and agreement thereon, were such as to be regarded by our government as constituting a request from the government of Vietnam."

The reply letter then asserts that "this request was confirmed by the communique" issued by South Vietnam's Prime Minister "on March 7, 1965, concerning the arrival of two United States Marine battalions in South Vietnam—the first such deployment of United States combat forces."

The communique asserted that the government of Vietnam has asked for and obtained the agreement of the American government "to send in the two Marine battalions. But that Saigon language of March 7, 1965, the record shows, only coincided with the United States Defense Department's public announcement of March 6 that the 3d Marine force was already well on its way to South Vietnam at that time. The actual deployment took place March 8, 1965."